Rape and Violence Against Women Have Always Been Terrorism: Are We So Keen To Go to War for All Women?

A CALL ON FEMINISTS TO PROTEST THE WAR AGAINST AFGHANISTAN

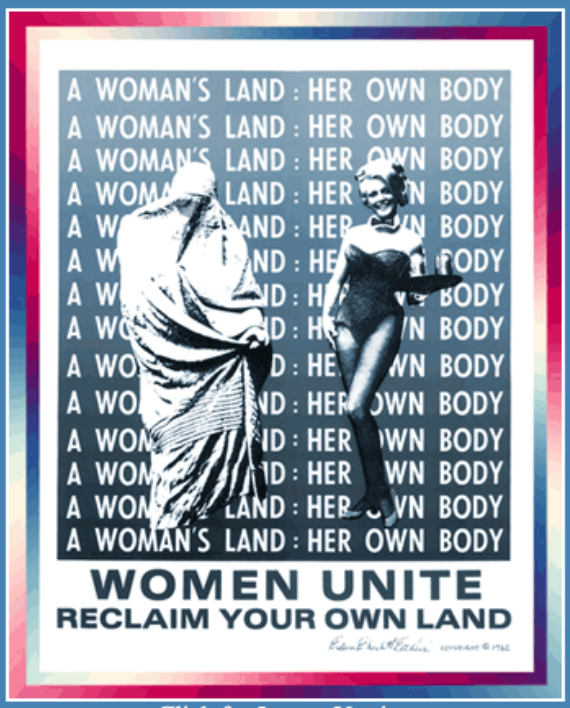
Part I

Nikki Craft
November 8, 2001

Stop the presses, the feminist revolution is finally happening! Some liberal and moderate American feminists are actually calling for *war* to end women's oppression. In light of the crimes committed against Afghan women by the Taliban, they say, decisive military action is the only recourse. Some are even chiding their more radical sisters (those, say, who are participating in peace marches and anti-militarism protests) for their lack of enthusiasm.

The newly militant liberal feminists say that under the circumstances, the radical feminists have misplaced their loyalty--their "pacifism" is incomprehensible and indefensible. It almost looks as if the radicals and the moderates have switched places: all of a sudden it's the mainstream feminists who are ready to defend women's lives, rights, and dignity with armed force.

Some feminist leaders are offering very public support for the U.S. government invasion of Afghanistan. On C-Span, I recently saw Feminist Majority president Ellie Smeal testify before Congress about the oppression of women in Afghanistan. She spoke eloquently of the need for women to have a role in the reconstructed post-war government. Mavis Leno, another Feminist Majority representative, reiterates that the Taliban must be "collapsed," that women must have a place at the table to form the new government. Neither of these women calls for an end to the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan. Nor in any of their frequent TV appearances have I heard either one even acknowledge that their government is terrorizing and dropping bombs on the heads of the same women they care so much about.[1] Nor have I heard either one acknowledge the brutal rape and other terrorism against women practiced by the warlords in the Northern Alliance, the faction the US is currently backing.



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Elizabeth Matz designed the poster "A Woman's Land: Her Own Body" in the mid '80s. I've had it hanging on my office wall all these years, looking at it most every day and suddenly (I'm slow!) it occurred to me that this poster was profoundly timely and should be seen by others than just us. If you would like to purchase a copy of this powerful poster please email Elizabeth Matz.

Look who all else is talking about women's rights now! Newt Gingrich, a self-proclaimed "hawk," says that to win the military war, first the U.S. must win the "moral arguments"; among other things, he says, we must show that "we are against the side who would oppress women." [2] On the Fox evening news, Haron Amin, a spokesman for the Northern Alliance, accused the Taliban of practicing "misogyny," "gender apartheid," and the "feminization of poverty." The next day, a Fox talking head threw his arms up right in the middle of a broadcast and cried out in frustration, "Don't you see what they are doing to women?!" Later the same commentators, so concerned about women being excluded in Afghanistan, defended the overall invisibility of women in most discussions about the war; that it's only rich, white all male generals and militarists being showcased by the U.S. media. With the exception of token Condoleezza Rice, our government's recent global round-table meetings look as segregated at the Taliban's.

Then there's George W. Bush's expressed concern. I never even knew his limited vocabulary included the word "oppression" until he used it several times last week when talking about the "evil-doers" oppressing women. But I don't trust him to have any real compassion for, or comprehension of, women's oppression in Afghanistan--or anywhere. When Bush said women in this country shouldn't have to be afraid he was speaking against racism, against harassment of Muslim women. But when he added that women shouldn't be afraid to be under the veil in this country, it sent a shudder down my spine. Among the millions of propaganda flyers the US is scattering over Afghanistan there is one that shows the Taliban hitting a woman with a stick. It reads, "Do you want *your* [emphasis mine] women to live this way?"

All this government and media hand-waving about 'women in Afghanistan' is a day late and a dollar short after such a conspicuous, and lengthy, lack of concern; the Taliban has been murdering, imprisoning and dispossessing, disenfranchising and dehumanizing Afghan women for almost a decade. It's also manipulatively, transparently selective: we're all upset about the oppression of women by the Taliban "bad guys," but similar restrictions and abuses are fine when it's the Saudi "good guys" who are doing it. In the propaganda carnival surrounding Mr. Bush's war, women are being used for a specific agenda, not defended in their own right and for their own

Screenshots of Nikki Craft's 2001 Anti-War Article on Afghanistan

This document preserves screenshots of Nikki Craft's online article, *A Call on Feminists to Protest the War Against Afghanistan*, Part I, dated November 8, 2001. The article was part of Craft's ACLU / Always Causing Legal Unrest anti-war work and challenged the use of Afghan women's suffering as propaganda for U.S. military intervention.

The screenshots preserve the article text, graphics, credits, footnotes, navigation links, and page design for archival use. They also document Craft's long-standing feminist anti-war position: opposing U.S. wars promoted by the military-industrial complex and U.S. government, including wars justified through oil, territory, geopolitical control, or selective concern for women's rights.

This version is arranged so that the first page is a clean full-page screenshot for Internet Archive preview/thumbnail display, with explanatory text beginning on the second page.

Prepared for use in the Nikki Craft Archival Project and for upload to the Internet Archive.

propaganda carnival surrounding Mr. Bush's war, women are being used for a specific agenda, not defended in their own right and for their own sake.

Show me how bombing Afghanistan has thus far improved, or is likely to improve, the material conditions of life for any Afghan woman. Show me how Bush's closing of the country's borders helps women--it keeps them trapped in Afghanistan between American bombs and two armies of male thugs. Show me how the US, with its fundamentalist and patriarchal allies, is challenging "fundamentalism" in this campaign---particularly, how are we challenging the oldest fundamentalism of all?

Systematic male privilege is the first fundamentalism. Has anyone wondered where the women fire fighters and cops were in all that "brotherhood" in the aftermath of 9.11? Why were, according to the Red Cross, eighty percent of those killed in the World Trade Center men? Didn't Cantor Fitzgerald, and the other corporations in the upper echelons of those buildings, hire very many women? It's not just the burqa and the Taliban that can make women invisible.

The ill-treatment of women occurs not only in "radical Islamist" countries, but in most countries on Earth. Women are statistically about 50 percent of the world population, but they work 2/3 of all the world's working hours, receiving only 1/10 of world income, and owning less than one percent of all world property. When was the last time any US politician made changing these conditions a top national priority? Are we sending in the Marines to enforce land reform? To protect women's right to unionize? To bust the traffickers who betray refugee women's hopes of a better life, steal their passports, reduce them to indentured sexual servants?

Filipina and Bangladeshi migrant laborers work as "maids" under conditions described as "modern-day slavery" in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Lebanon and worldwide, [3] but we never hear about them on Fox news. The World Health Organization estimates 200,000 to 400,000 women die worldwide every year from illegal, incompetently-performed abortions. The women in Nigeria who are stoned to death in the streets weren't mentioned by the press, or anyone else, during the recent visit there by George W. Bush. Female infanticide, rigorously suppressed by Mao's regime, has made a comeback in China. We don't notice U.S. politicians getting all bent out of shape about it.

Millions of women in Africa are infected with AIDS, not because they are promiscuous or careless, but because their husbands or boyfriends are promiscuous and refuse to use condoms, or because they are raped by male acquaintances or strangers who are infected. There are insurance companies in South Africa which sell "rape insurance" because the incidence of rape is so high. Rape in an AIDS-infected country is not just about pain and humiliation--it can be a death sentence. But we don't hear U.S. politicians railing about this, or demanding that South African women have representation in government.

Many women come to the U.S., the "land of freedom," only to be used as indentured, captive labor in sweatshops no different from the ones they worked in back home. You can find captive women in the U.S.--women afraid of a husband's fist or of the sweatshop boss, women who have to ask permission to go to the bathroom, who are threatened with violence if they complain about health hazards in their workplace, who can't get their passports back from the thugs who run the operation.

Even women born here might merit our attention. Our tens of thousands of prostituted women and girls -- in Des Moines IA, Los Angeles CA, Portland OR, Your Town USA--beaten and threatened by their pimps, abused by their "customers," what about them? Their deaths go uninvestigated, their lives undocumented--when did the US government last get all concerned about these oppressed and endangered women? In NYC, the cops traditionally don't even start to investigate until numerous prostitutes are killed in one month. We apply a different standard to ourselves and our allies, and not just the brute squad that calls itself the Northern Alliance. Women are not allowed to drive cars in Saudi Arabia, but we don't hear men lamenting about this discrimination on the news every night.

In 1987 the Turkish government enacted its so-called "Anti-Terror Laws." Amnesty International informs us that under these laws, women prisoners and detainees in Turkey have been subjected to genital electroshock, "virginity testing," rape (including rape with objects), and other forms of torture and sexual assault while in official custody. Now that Turkey is "with us" against the Taliban--are we likely to hear criticism of these atrocities against women any time soon? Don't hold your breath.

Bearing all this in mind, can anyone really believe the U.S. is invading and bombing yet another country, threatening millions of refugees with starvation and who knowns what else, [4] just because Afghan women are being subjected to patriarchal persecution and violence?

When our boys drop airline meals[5] into mine fields, or intentionally target Red Cross hospitals, is it all in the service of our grand humanitarian mission to liberate the women of Afghanistan? To free the women of Afghanistan from those stifling garments so frighteningly similar to body bags? Of course it isn't.

Our national leaders, the ones aching to be the policemen of the world and most recently the great protectors of womankind, won't be the ones to liberate the women of Afghanistan. They aren't the "good guys." In war (and peace) these gentlemen will rape and plunder women as their war booty, strip them in "gentlemen's clubs," and buy and sell them in prostitution. A goodly number of them beat their girlfriends and wives. They write sexist, misogynist messages on the heads of their bombs. Eight percent of female Persian Gulf War veterans in one survey reported being sexually abused during Desert Shield and Desert Storm. That's how much U.S. soldier-boys care about women. They beat, rape and sexually harass even their wives, their lovers, and their sisters in arms; consider what Afghan women have to look forward to, under U.S. occupation. Ask the women and girls of Okinawa, if you can't figure it out for yourself.

Screenshot 3

Let's get real here. Women don't matter now any more than they did when the Northern Alliance was raping them. The U.S. media paid no attention to the abuse of women then. Along came the Taliban, our "freedom fighters" against the Godless Commies, and what they did to women still didn't matter much--except in the frantic email petitions feminists were spamming each other with on the Internet. Now the U.S. is buying the rapists guns, dropping them ammo, feeding them, training them to be even more effective killers and helping them to regain control of 'their country'--does anyone imagine this won't include regaining control of 'their women'?

The human rights of the women in Afghanistan don't matter any more now than they did when CNN showed, for the first time in the beginning of September, the extraordinary documentary "Beneath the Veil." It appeared briefly and sank without a trace; only outraged feminists reviewed it, made videotape copies, and mentioned it in their petitions and letters to editors. It's one of the most brave and important documentaries I've ever seen in my life, but it made the very tiniest splash on the slick surface of U.S. media culture.

It wasn't until we needed some wartime propaganda that 'Beneath the Veil' suddenly started being aired multiple times per day on CNN, over several weekends. All of a sudden, in October, it re-emerged and it became terribly important that everyone in America see this essential documentary--if not on CNN, then excerpted on all their affiliates many times over. One article referred to it as "heavy rotation".

Though they may be temporarily first in the soundbites, women are the very last item on the agenda. If the U.S. could still 'make the Taliban obey' like a kept woman or an obedient wife, we would still be funding the Taliban. If the U.S. could "own" the Taliban, their treatment of women would have remained irrelevant, as it has been for the last several years; as it has been for every other dictator, king, shah, sheik, geek, tyrant or tinhorn terrorist we've ever backed.

But the Taliban is biting the hand that fed it for so long, and now its misdeeds are suddenly all hand-wringingly shocking and dreadful, where before they were mere boyish pranks or temporary rough spots in the transition away from Godless Communist rule. In fact, Afghani women will be fortunate if they get any say in the new government at all. By the time the war is over and the Great Powers once again sit down to impose a government on the defeated party, a focus on women's rights will no longer be strategically advantageous to the U.S.

No nation on earth has ever gone to war for women's rights. We are not likely to be the first.

To be continued...

This article could not have been written without the guidance and editing assistance of De Clarke and Vicki Behrens. Special appreciation also to Evelyn Craft, Linnea Smith, Sarah Haggard, Margaret Gannon, Diane Rosenfel, Tammy Gordon, Joyce Wu, Amy Winters, Bijan Parsia and Elizabeth Matz.

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Screenshot 4

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Footnotes

back 1. Tim Wise, an activist and anti-racism educator, points out the contradiction. He writes: "Not only does she [Smeal] appear to support the overthrow of the Taliban by the same U.S. government that funded it and cared not a whit for the women there until six weeks ago, but she also seems to trust that patriarchy can be pounded into rubble by exploding phallic symbols, dropped and fired by guys whose view of feminism is probably not much better than Mullah Omar's. Talk about irony." Tim Wise, "Who's Being Naive? War-Time Realism Through the Looking Glass." October 28, 2001.

back 2 "U.S. Anti-Terrorism Efforts." American Enterprise Institute Conference. October 29, 2001. C-Span.

back 3. Kim Ghattas, "Much Needed, Much Abused."

back 4. Since the press coverage is strictly controlled and censored.

back 5. Western junk food in yellow packages the same size and shape as U.S.-made cluster bombs.

See Also
Feminists Agonize Over War in Afghanistan

Since 11.04.01